Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 14

Obscure Darkness

Chapter: 104

Part: 1

Anxious

‘No,’ Marcel snarled. His jowl was strained stingy, his lips rolled back from his teeth.

‘It's the only way that makes sense,’ Ray insisted. ‘You've chosen not to live without her, and that doesn't leave me a choice.’

Marcel lowered my hand, shoving away from the table. He

stalked out of the room, grumbling under his breath.

‘I guess you know my vote.’ Ray sighed.

I was still staring after Marcel. ‘Thanks,’ I mumbled.

An earsplitting crash echoed from the other room.

I flinched and spoke quickly. ‘That's all I needed. Thank you. For wanting to keep me. I feel the same way about all of you, also.’ My voice was rough with sensation by the end.

Isla was at my side in a flash, her cold arms around me.

‘Sweetest Bella,’ she breathed, you look just like your real mom, and I know who she was and she was lovely, yet I can say to this day over fear.

I held her back. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ross glancing down at the table, and I understood, understood that my words could be construed in two ways.

‘Well, Olivia,’ I said when Isla released me. ‘Where do you want to do this?’

Olivia stared at me, her eyes widening with terror.

‘No! No! No!’

Marcel yelled, charging back into the room. He was in my face ere I had time to blink, circling over me, his grimace distorted in rage. ‘Are you crazy?’ He shouted. ‘Have you utterly lost your mind?’

I cringed away, my hands over my ears.

‘Um, girl,’ Olivia interjected in an anxious voice. ‘I don't think I'm ready for that. I'll need to prepare…’

‘You promised,’ I reminded her, glaring under Marcel’s arm.

‘I know, but… Seriously, girl! I don't have any idea how to not kill you.’

‘You can do it,’ I encouraged. ‘I trust you.’

Marcel snarled in fury.

Olivia shook her head quickly, looking panicked.

‘Ray?’ I turned to look at him.

Marcel grabbed my face in his hand, forcing me to look at him. His other hand was out a palm toward Ray.

Ray ignored that. ‘I'm able to do it,’ he answered my question. I wished I could see his expression. ‘You would be in no danger of me losing control.’

‘Sounds good.’ I hoped he could understand; it was hard to talk the way Marcel held my jaw.

‘Hold on, ‘Marcel said between his teeth. ‘It doesn't have to be now.’

‘There's no reason for it not to be now,’ I said, the words coming out distorted.

‘I can think of a few.’

‘Of course- you can,’ I said sourly. ‘Now let go of me.’

He freed my face and wrapped his arms across his chest. ‘In about two hours, Jack will be here scanning for you. I wouldn't put it past him to involve the policemen.’

‘All three of them.’ But I frowned.

This was always the hardest part. Jack, Renee. Now Marcel, too. The people I would lose, the people I would hurt. I wished there was some way that I could be the only one to suffer, but I knew that was impossible.

At the same time, I was hurting them more by staying human. Putting Jack in constant danger through my proximity. Putting Maggie in worse danger still by drawing his enemies across the land he felt bound to protect. And Renee-I couldn't even risk a visit to see my mother for fear of

bringing my deadly problems along with me!

I was a danger magnet; I'd accepted that about myself.

Accepting this, I knew I needed to be able to take care of myself and protect the ones I loved, even if that meant that I couldn't be with them. I needed to be strong.

‘In the interest of remaining inconspicuous, ‘Marcel said, still talking through his gritted teeth, but looking at Ray now, ‘I suggest that we put this conversation off, at the very

least until Karly Finishes high school, and moves out of Jack's house.’

‘That's a reasonable request, girl,’ Ray pointed out.

I thought about Jack's reaction when he woke up this morning, if after all that life had put him through in the last week with Harry's loss, and then I had put him through with my unexplained disappearance-he where to find my bed empty. Jack deserved better than that. It was just a little more time; graduation wasn't so far away…

I pursed my lips. ‘I'll consider it.’

Marcel relaxed. His jaw unclenched.

‘I should probably take you home,’ he said, calmer now, but clearly in a hurry to get me out of here. ‘Just in case Jack wakes up early.’

I looked at Ray. ‘After graduation?’

‘You have my word.’

I took a deep breath, smiled, and turned back to Marcel. ‘Okay. You can take me home.’

Marcel rushed me out of the house before Ray could promise me anything else. He took me out the back, so I didn't get to see what was broken in the living room.

It was a tranquil trip home. I was feeling successful, including a little self-righteous. Scared stiff, too, of course, but I heard not to think about that part. It did me no good to worry about the pain-the natural or the

emotional- so I wouldn't. Not until I ought to.

When we got to my house, Marcel didn't pause. He dashed up the wall and through my window in half a second. Then he pulled my arms from around his neck and set me on the bed.

I believed I had a pretty good belief of what he was thinking, but his character surprised me. Instead of angry, it was anticipating. He paced morosely back and forth across my darkroom while I watched with growing mistrust.

‘Whatever you're planning, it's not going to work,’ I told him.

‘Sh-h… I'm thinking.’

‘Ugh,’ I groaned, throwing myself back on the bed and pulling the quilt over my head.

There was no sound, but suddenly he was there. He flipped the cover back, so he could see me. He was lying next to me. His hand reached up to brush my hair from my cheek.

‘If you don't mind, I'd much rather you didn't hide your face. I've

lived without it for as long as I can stand. Now… tell me something.’

‘What?’ I asked, unwilling.

Part: 2

Creation

‘If you could have anything in the world, anything at all, what would it be?’

I could feel the skepticism in my eyes.

‘You.’

He shook his head impatiently.

‘Something you don't already have.’

I wasn't sure where he was trying to lead me, so I thought carefully before I answered. I came up with something that was both true, and also probably impossible.

‘I would want… Ray not to have to do it. I would want you to change me.’

I observed his reflection warily, expecting more of the fury I'd noticed at his house. I was astonished that his expression didn't change. It was

nevertheless calculating, deep,?and wise.

‘What would you be willing to trade for that?’

I couldn't accept my ears. I ogled at his composed face and blurted out the clue before I could think about this.

‘Anything.’

He smiled faintly, and then pursed his lips. ‘Five years?’

My face twisted into an expression somewhere between chagrin and horror.

‘You said anything,’ he reminded me.

‘Yes, but… you'll use the time to find a way out of it. I have to strike while the iron is hot. Besides, it's just too dangerous to be human-for me, at least. So, anything but that.’

He frowned. ‘Three years?’

‘No!’

‘Isn't it worth anything to you at all?’

I thought about how much I wanted this. Better to keep a poker face, I decided, and not let him know how- very much that was. It would give me more leverage. ‘Six months?’

He rolled his eyes. ‘Not good enough.’

‘One year, then,’ I said. ‘That's my limit.’

‘At least give me two.’

‘No way. Nineteen I'll do. But I'm not going anywhere near twenty. If you're staying in your teens forever, then so am I.’

He thought for a minute. ‘All right.

Forget time limits. If you want me to be the one then you'll just have to meet one condition.’

‘Condition?’ My voice went flat. ‘What condition?’

His eyes were cautious he spoke slowly. ‘Marry me first.’

I stared at him, waiting…

‘Okay. What's the punchline?’

He sighed. ‘You're wounding my ego, girl. I just proposed to you, and you think it's a joke.’

‘Marcel, please be serious.’

‘I am one hundred percent serious.’ He eyed cautiously with no hint of joviality in his face. ‘Oh, come on,’ I said, an edge of insanity in my voice. ‘I'm only eighteen.’

‘Well, I'm nearly a hundred and ten. It's time I settled down.’

I looked away, out the dark window, trying to control the panic before it gave me away.

‘Look, marriage isn't exactly that high on my list of priorities, you know? It was sort of the kiss of death for Renee and Jack.’

‘Interesting choice of words.’

‘You know what I mean.’

He gasped deeply. ‘Please don't say me that you're fearful of the commitment,’ his voice was

disbelieving, and I realized what he meant.

‘That's not it exactly,’ I hedged. ‘I'm… afraid of Renee. She has some intense opinions on getting married before you're thirty.’

‘Because she'd rather you became one of the eternal damned than getting married.’ He laughed darkly.

‘You think you're joking.’

‘Girl, if you compare the level of commitment between a marital union as opposed to bartering your soul in

exchange for eternity as an angel…' He shook his head. 'If you're not brave enough to marry me, then-'

'Well,' I interrupted. 'What if I did?

What if I told you to take me to Vegas now?

Would I be an angel in three days?'

He smiled, his teeth flashing in the dark.

'Sure,' he said, calling my bluff.

'I'll get my car.'

‘Dammit.’ I muttered. ‘I'll give you eighteen months.’

‘No deal,’ he said, grinning. ‘I like this condition.’

‘Fine. I'll have Ray do it when I graduate.’

‘If that's what you want.’ He shrugged, and his smile became angelic.

‘You're impossible,’ I groaned. ‘A monster.’ He chuckled. ‘Is that why you won't marry me?’

I groaned again.

He tilted toward me; his night-dark eyes vanished and smoldered and shattered my concentration. ‘Please, Bella?’ He exhaled.

I misremembered how to inhale for a moment. When I recovered, I shook my head quickly, trying to clear my abruptly clouded mind.

‘Would this have gone better if I’d had time to get a ring?’

‘No! No rings!’ I very nearly snouted.

‘Now you've done it,’ he whispered.

‘Oops.’

‘Jack's getting up; I'd better leave, ‘Marcel said with resignation.

My heart stopped beating.

He gauged my expression for a second. ‘Would it be childish of me to hide in your closet, then?’

‘No,’ I whispered eagerly. ‘Stay. Please.’ Marcel smiled and disappeared.

I seethed in the darkness as I waited for Jack to check on me. Marcel knew exactly what he was doing, and I was willing to bet that all the injured surprise was part of the poly. Of course, I still had the Ray option, but now that I knew there was a chance that, Marcel would change me himself, I wanted it bad. He was such a cheater.

My door cracked open.

‘Morning, Dad.’

‘Oh, hey, girl.’ He sounded embarrassed at getting caught. ‘I didn't know you were awake.’

‘Yeah. I've just been waiting for you to wake up, so I could take a shower.’ I started to get up.

‘Hold on,’ Jack said, flipping the light on. I blinked in the sudden brightness, and carefully kept my eyes away from the closet.

‘Let's talk for a minute first.’

I couldn't control my grimace. I'd forgotten to ask Olivia for a good excuse.

‘You know you're in trouble.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘I just about went crazy these last three days. I come home from Harry's funeral, and you're gone.

Marcel could only tell me that you had run off with Olivia and that he thought you were in trouble. You did not leave me a number, and you did not call. I did not know where you were or when-or if you were coming back. Do you have any idea how… how…?’ He could not finish the sentence. He sucked in a sharp breath and moved on. ‘Can you give me one reason why- I

shouldn't ship you off to Ashville this second?’

My eyes narrowed. So, it was going to be threats, was it? Two could play that game. I sat up, pulling the quilt around me. ‘Because I won't go.’

‘Now just one-minute, young lady-’

‘Look, Dad, I accept complete responsibility for my actions, and you have the right to ground me for as long as you want. I will also do all the chores and laundry and dishes until you think I've learned my lesson.’

-And-

‘I guess you're within your rights if you want to kick me out, too- but that won't make me go to Florida.’

His face turned bright red. He took a few deep breaths before he answered.

‘Would you like to explain where you've been?’

Oh, crap… ‘There was… an emergency.’

He raised his eyebrows in expectation of my brilliant explanation.

I filled my cheeks with air and then blew it out noisily. ‘I don't know what to tell you, Dad. It was mostly a misunderstanding. He said, she said. It got out of hand.’

He waited with a distrustful expression.

‘See, Olivia told Rose about me jumping off the cliff…’ I was scrambling frantically to make this work, to keep it as close to the truth as possible so that my inability to lie convincingly would not undermine the excuse, but before I could go on, Jack's expression

reminded me that he didn't know anything about the cliff.

Major oops as if I wasn't already toasted.

‘I guess I didn't tell you about that,’ I choked out. ‘It was nothing. Just messing around, swimming with Maggie. Anyway, Rose told Marcel, and he was upset. She sort-of accidentally made it sound like I was- trying to kill myself or something. He wouldn't answer his phone, so Olivia dragged me to… L.A., to explain in person.’ I shrugged, desperately hoping that he

would not be so distracted by my slip that he'd miss the brilliant explanation I'd provided.

Jack's face was frozen. ‘Were you trying to kill yourself, baby girl?’

‘No, of course not. Just having fun with Maggie. Cliff diving. The La Push kids do it all the time. Like I said, nothing.’

Jack's face heated up from frozen too hot with fury. ‘What's it to Marcel Cullen anyway?’ he barked. ‘All this time, he's just left you are dangling without a word-’

I interrupted him. ‘Another misunderstanding.’

His face flushed again. ‘So, is he back then?’

‘I'm not sure what the exact plan is. I think they all are.’

He shook his head, the vein in his temples pulsing. ‘I want you to stay away from him, Bella. I don't trust him. He's nasty to you. I won't allow him to mess you up like that again.’

‘Fine,’ I said curtly.

Jack rocked back onto his heels. ‘Oh.’

He scrambled for a second, exhaling loudly in surprise. ‘I thought you were going to be difficult.’

‘I am.’ I stared straight into his eyes. ‘I meant, 'Fine, I'll move out.’

His eyes swelled; his face turned puce. My resolve wavered as I commenced to worry about his well-being. He was no younger than Harry…

‘Dad, I don't want to move out,’ I said in a softer tone. ‘I love you. I

know you're worried, but you need to trust me on this. And you're going to have to ease up on Marcel if you want me to stay. Do you want me to live here or not?'

'That's not fair, baby girl. You know I want you to stay.'

'Then be nice to Marcel, because he's going to be where I am.' I said it with confidence. The conviction of my epiphany was still strong.

'Not under my roof,' Jack stormed.

I sighed a heavy sigh. ‘Look, I'm not going to give you any more ultimatums tonight-or I guess it's this morning. Just think about it for a few days, okay? But keep in mind that Marcel and I are sorts of a package deal.’

‘baby-’

‘Think it over,’ I insisted. ‘And while you're doing that, could you give me some privacy? I need a shower.’

Jack's face was a strange shade of purple, but he left, slamming the

door behind him. I heard him stomp furiously down the stairs.

I threw off my quilt, and Marcel was already there, sitting in the rocking chair as if he’d been present through the whole conversation.

‘Sorry about that,’ I whispered.

‘It's not as if I don't deserve far worse,’ he murmured. ‘Don't start anything with Jack over me, please. ‘

‘Don't worry about it,’ I breathed as I gathered up my bathroom things and a set of clean clothes. ‘I will

start exactly as much as is necessary, and no more than that. Or are you trying to tell me I have nowhere to go?' I widened my eyes with a false alarm.

'You'd move in with a house full of angels?'

'That's probably the safest place for someone like me. Besides…' I grinned.

'If Jack kicks me out, then there's no need for a graduation deadline, is there?'

His jaw tightened. ‘So, eager for eternal damnation,’ he muttered.

‘You know you don't believe that.’

‘Oh, don't I?’ He fumed.

‘No, you don't.’

He glowered at me and started to speak, but I cut him off.

‘If you believed that you'd lost your soul, then when I found you in Volterra, you would have realized immediately what was happening, instead of thinking we were both dead

together. But you didn't-you say 'Amazing. Ray was right, ‘I reminded him, triumphant. ‘There's hope in you, after all.’

For once, Marcel was speechless.

‘So, let's both just be hopeful, all right?’ I suggested. ‘Not that it matters. If you stay, I don't need heaven.’

He got up slowly and came to put his hands on either side of my face as he stared into my eyes. ‘Forever,’ he vowed, still a little staggered.

‘That's all I'm asking for,’ I said and stretched up on my toes so that I could press my lips to his.

-EPILOGUE TREATY-

ALMOST EVERYTHING WAS BACK TO NORMAL-THE GOOD, pre-zombie normal-in less time than I would have believed possible. The hospital welcomed Ray back with eager arms, not even bothering to conceal their delight that Isla had found life in P.A. so little to her liking. Thanks to the Calculus test I'd missed while abroad,

Olivia and Marcel were in better shape to graduate than I was at the moment.

Suddenly, the college was a priority (college was still planning B, on the off chance that Marcel's offer swayed me from the postgraduation Ray choice.) Many deadlines had passed me by, but Marcel had a new stack of applications for me to fill out every day. He had already done the Harvard route, so it did not bother him that, thanks to my procrastination, we might both end up at Penn's Community College next year.

Jack was not happy with me or speaking to Marcel. But at least Marcel was allowed during my designated visiting hours inside the house again. I just was not allowed out of it.

School and work were the only exceptions and the dreary, dull yellow walls of my classrooms had become oddly inviting to me of late. That had a lot to do with the person who sat on the desk beside me.

Marcel had resumed his schedule from the beginning of the year, which put him in most of my

classes again. My behavior had been such last fall, after the Barn's supposed move to P.A., that the seat beside me had never been filled. Even Mike, always eager to take any advantage, had kept a safe distance. With Marcel back in place, it was almost as if the last eight months were just a disturbing nightmare.

Almost, but not quite. There was the house arrest situation, for one thing. And for another, before the fall, I had not been best friends with Marcel

Black. So, of course, I had not missed him then.

I was not at liberty to go to La Push, and Marcel was not coming to see me. He would not even answer my phone calls.

I made these calls mostly at night after Marcel had been kicked out promptly at nine by a grimly gleeful Jack-and before Marcel snuck back through my window when Jack was asleep. I chose that time to make my fruitless calls because I had noticed that Marcel made a certain face every

time, I mentioned Marcel's name. Disapproving and wary… even angry. I guessed that he had some reciprocal prejudice against the horse, though he was not as vocal as Marcel had been about the 'bloodsuckers.'

So, I did not mention Marcel much.

With Marcel near me, it was hard to think about unhappy things- even my former best friend, who was very unhappy right now, due to me. When I did think of Maggie, I always felt guilty for not thinking of him more.

The fairy tale was back on. Prince returned; the bad spell broken. I was not sure exactly what to do about the leftover, unresolved character. Where was his happily ever after?

Weeks passed, and Marcel still would not answer my calls. It started to become a constant worry. Like a dripping faucet in the back of my head that I could not shut off or ignore. Drip, drip, drip. Marcel, Marcel, Marcel.

Part: 3

Allusion

So, though I did not mention Marcel much, sometimes my frustration and anxiety boiled over.

‘It's just plain rude!’ I vented one Saturday afternoon when Marcel picked me up from work. Being angry about things was easier than feeling guilty. ‘Downright insulting!’

I had varied my pattern, in hopes of a different response. I had called Maggie from work this time, only to get an unhelpful Billy.

Again…

‘Billy said he didn't want to talk to me,’ I fumed, glaring at the rain oozing down the passenger window.

‘That he was there and wouldn't walk three steps to get to the phone! Usually, Billy just says he is out or busy or sleeping or something. I mean, it is not like I did not know he was lying to me, but at least it was a polite way to handle it. I guess Billy hates me now, too. It's not fair!’

‘It's not you, girl, ‘Marcel said quietly.

‘Nobody hates you.’

‘Feels that way,’ I muttered, folding my arms across my chest. It was no more than a stubborn gesture. There was no hole there now- I could barely remember the empty feeling anymore.

‘Marcel knows we're back, and I'm sure that he's ascertained that I'm with you,’ Marcel said. ‘He won't come anywhere near me. The enmity is rooted too deeply.’

‘That's stupid. He knows you're not… like other angels.’

‘There's still good reason to keep a safe distance.’

I glared blindly out the windshield, seeing only Marcel’s face, set in the bitter mask I hated.

‘Girl, we are what we are, ‘Marcel said quietly. ‘I can control myself, but I doubt he can. He is very young. It would most likely turn into a fight, and I don't know if I could stop it before I k-’ he broke off, and then quickly continued. ‘Before I hurt him. You would be unhappy. I don't want that to happen.’

I remembered what Marcel had said in the kitchen, hearing the words

with the perfect recall in his husky voice. I am not sure that I am even-tempered enough to handle that…

You would not like it so much if I killed your friend. But he had been able to handle it, that time…

‘Marcel,’ I whispered. ‘Were you about to say 'killed him? Where you?’

He looked away from me, staring into the rain. In front of us, the red light I had not noticed turned green and he started forward again, driving

very slowly. Not his usual way of driving.

‘I would try… very hard… not to do that, ‘Marcel finally said.

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open, but he continued to look straight ahead.

We were paused at the corner stop sign.

Abruptly, I remembered what had happened to Paris when Romeo came back.

The stage directions were simple: They fight.

Paris falls.

But that was ridiculous. Impossible.

‘Well,’ I said, and took a deep breath, shaking my head to dispel the words in my head. ‘Nothing like that is ever going to happen, so there's no reason to worry about it. And you know Jack's staring at the clock right now. You'd better get me home before I get in more trouble for being late.’

I turned my face up toward him, to smile halfheartedly.

Every time I looked at his face, that impossibly perfect face, my heart pounded strong and healthy and very there in my chest. This time, the pounding raced ahead of its usual besotted pace. I recognized the expression on his status till the face.

‘You're already in more trouble, baby girl,’ he whispered through unmoving lips.

I slid closer, clutching his arm as I followed his gaze to see what he

was seeing. I do not know what I expected-AVA standing in the middle of the street, her flaming red hair blowing in the wind or a line of tall black cloaks… or a pack of an angry horse. But I did not see anything at all.

'What? What is it?'

He took a deep breath. 'Jack…'
'My dad?' I screeched.

He looked down at me then, and his expression was calm enough to ease some of my panics.

‘Jack… is probably not going to kill you, but he's thinking about it,’ he told me. He started to drive forward again, down my street, but he passed the house and parked by the edge of the trees.

‘What did I do?’ I gasped.

Marcel glanced back at Jack's house. I followed his gaze and noticed for the first time what was parked in the driveway next to the cruiser. Shiny, bright red, impossible to miss.

My motorcycle, flaunting itself in the driveway.

Marcel had said that Jack was ready to kill me, so he must know that that it was mine. There was only one person who could be behind this treachery.

'No!' I gasped. 'Why? Why would Marcel do this to me?' The sting of betrayal washed through me. I had trusted Marcel implicitly-trusted him with every single secret I had. He was supposed to be the safe harbor person I could always rely on. Of course, things were strained right now, but I did not think any of the underlying foundations

had changed. I did not think that was changeable!

What had I done to deserve this? Jack was going to be so mad and worse than that, he was going to be hurt and worried. Didn't he have enough to deal with already? I would have never imagined that Maggie could be so petty and just plain mean. Tears sprang, smarting, into my eyes, but they were not tearing of sadness. I had been betrayed. I was suddenly so angry that my head throbbed like it was going to explode.

‘Is he still here?’ I hissed.

‘Yes. He's waiting for us there. ‘Marcel told me, nodding toward the slender path that divided the dark fringe of the forest in two.

I jumped out of the car, launching myself toward the trees with my hands already balled into fists for the first punch.

Why did Marcel have to be so much faster than me?

He caught me around the waist before I made the path.

‘Let me go! I'm going to murder him! Traitor!’ I shouted the epithet toward the trees.

‘Jack will hear you, ‘Marcel warned me. ‘And once he gets you inside, he marries brick over the doorway.’

Part: 4

Intuitively

I glanced back at the house instinctively, and it seemed like the glossy red bike was all I could see. I

was seeing red. My head throbbed again.

‘Just give me one round with Marcel, and then I'll deal with Jack.’ I struggled futilely to break free.

‘Marcel Black wants to see me. That's why he's still here.’

That stopped me cold-took the fight right out of me. My hands went limp.

They fight; Paris falls.

I was furious, but not that furious.

‘Talk?’ I asked.

‘More or less.’

‘How much more?’ My voice shook.

Marcel smoothed my hair back from my face. ‘Don't worry, he's not here to fight me. He's acting as… a spokesperson for the pack.’

‘Oh!’

Marcel looked at the house again, then tightened his arm around my waist and pulled me toward the woods. ‘We should hurry.

Jack's getting impatient.’

We did not have to go far; Marcel waited just- a short- ways up the path. He lounged against a mossy tree trunk as he waited, his face hard and bitter, exactly the way I knew it would be. He looked at me, and then at Marcel. Marcel’s mouth stretched into a humorless sneer, and he shrugged away from the tree. He stood on the balls of his bare feet, leaning slightly forward, with his trembling hands clenched into fists. He looked bigger than the last time I had seen him.

Somehow, impossibly, he was still growing. He would tower over Marcel if they stood next to each other.

Nonetheless, Marcel stopped as soon as we saw him, leaving a wide space between us and Marcel. Marcel turned his body, shifting me so that I was behind him. I leaned around him to stare at Marcel-to accuse him with my eyes.

I would have thought that seeing his resentful, cynical expression would only make me angrier. Instead, it reminded me of the last time I had seen

him, with tears in his eyes. My fury weakened, faltered, as I stared at Marcel. It had been so long since I had seen him- I hated that our reunion had to be like this.

‘HEY- Girl,’ Marcel said as a greeting, nodding once toward me without looking away from Marcel.

‘Why?’

I whispered, trying to hide the sound of the lump in my throat.

‘How could you do this to me, Marcel?’

The sneer vanished, but his face stayed hard and rigid. ‘It's for the best.’

‘What is that supposed to mean? Do you want Jack to strangle me? Or did you want him to have a heart attack, like Harry? No matter how mad you are at me, how could you do this to him?’

Marcel winced, and his eyebrows pulled together, but he did not answer.

‘He didn't want to hurt anyone- he just wanted to get you grounded so

that you wouldn't be allowed to spend time with me, ‘Marcel murmured, explaining the thoughts Marcel would not say.

Marcel’s eyes sparked with hate as he glowered at Marcel again.

‘Awe, Maggie!’ I groaned. ‘I'm already grounded! Why do you think I haven't been down to La Push to kick your butt for avoiding my phone calls?’

Marcel’s eyes flashed back to me, confused for the first time. ‘That is why?’ He asked, and then locked his

jaw like he was sorry he had said anything.

‘He thought I wouldn't let you, not Jack, ‘Marcel explained again.

‘Stop that,’ Marcel snapped.

Marcel did not answer.

Marcel shuddered once and then gritted his teeth as hard as his fists.

‘Karly wasn’t exaggerating about you… abilities,’ he said through his teeth. ‘So-o you must already know why I'm here.’

‘Yes, ‘Marcel agreed in a soft voice. ‘On the other hand, before you begin, I need to say something.’

Marcel waited, clenching, and unclenching his hands as he tried to control the shivers rolling down his arms.

‘Thank you, ‘Marcel said, and his voice throbbed with the depth of his sincerity. ‘I will never be able to tell you how grateful I am. I will owe you for the rest of me… existence.’ Marcel stared at him blankly, his shudders stilled by surprise. He exchanged a

glance with me, but my face was just as mystified.

‘For keeping Karly alive, ‘Marcel clarified, his voice rough and fervent.

‘When I… didn't.’

‘Marcel-,’ I started to say, but he held one hand up, his eyes on Marcel.

Understanding washed over Marcel’s face before the hard mask returned. ‘I didn't do it for your benefit.’

‘I know. But that does not erase the gratitude I feel. I thought you should know. If there's ever anything in my power to do for you…’

Marcel raised one black brow.

Marcel shook his head. ‘That's not in my power.’

‘Whose, then?’ Marcel growled.

Marcel looked down at me. ‘Hers. I am a quick learner, Marcel Black, and I do not make the same mistake twice. I'm here until she orders me away.’

I was immersed momentarily in his golden gaze. It was not hard to understand what I had missed in the conversation. The only thing that Marcel would want from Marcel would be his absence.

‘Never,’ I whispered, still locked in Marcel’s eyes.

Marcel made a gagging sound.

I unwillingly broke free from Marcel’s gaze to frown at Marcel. ‘Was there something else you needed, Marcel? You wanted me in trouble- mission Accomplished.

Jack might just send me to military school.

But that will not keep me away from Marcel. There is nothing that can do that.

What more do you want?’

Marcel kept his eyes on Marcel ‘I just needed to remind your bloodsucking friends of a few key points in the treaty they agreed to.

The treaty chat is the only thing stopping me from ripping his throat out right this minute.’

‘We haven't forgotten, ‘Marcel said while I demanded, ‘What key points?’

Marcel still glowered at Marcel, but he answered me. ‘The treaty is quite specific. If any of them bite a human, the truce is over. Bite, not kill,’ he emphasized. Finally, he looked at me. His eyes were cold.

It only took me a second to grasp the distinction, and then my face was as cold as his.

‘That's none of your business.’

‘The hell it-’ was all he managed to choke out.

I did not expect my hasty words to bring on such a strong response. Despite the warning he had come to give, he must not have known. He must have thought the warning was just a precaution. He had not realized- or did not want to believe that I had already made my choice. That I was intending to become a member of the Cullen family.

My answer sent Marcel into near convulsions. He pressed his fists

hard against his temples, closing his eyes tight and curling in on himself as he tried to control the spasms. His face turned sallow green under the russet skin.

‘Maggie? You okay?’ I asked anxiously.

I took a half-step toward him, then Marcel caught me and yanked me back behind his own body. ‘Careful! He's not under control,’ he warned me.

But Marcel was already himself again; only his arms were shaking now.

He scowled at Marcel with pure hate. ‘Ugh. I would never hurt her.’

Neither Marcel nor I missed the inflection or the accusation it had. A low hiss escaped Marcel’s lips. Marcel clenched his fists reflexively.

‘BELLA!’ Jack's yell echoed from the direction of the house. ‘YOU GET IN THIS HOUSE THIS MOMENT!’

All of us froze, listening to the silence that followed.

I was the first to speak; my voice trembled. ‘Crap!’

Marcel’s furious expression faltered. ‘I am sorry about that,’ he muttered. ‘I had to do what I could- I had to try…’

‘Thanks.’ The tremor in my voice ruined the sarcasm. I stared up the path, half expecting Jack to come barreling through the wet ferns like an enraged bull. I would be the red flag in that scenario.

‘Just one more thing, ‘Marcel said to me, and then he looked at Marcel. ‘We've found no trace of AVA on our side of the line-have you?’

He knew the answer as soon as Marcel thought it, but Marcel spoke the answer anyway. ‘Last time was while Karly was… away. We let her think she was slipping through-we were tightening the circle, getting ready to ambush her-’ Ice shot down my spine.

‘But then she took off like a bat out of hell. Near as we can tell, she caught your little female's scent and bailed. She hasn't come near our lands since.’

Marcel nodded. ‘When she comes back, she's not your problem anymore. We'll-’

‘She killed on our turf,’ Marcel hissed.

‘She's ours!’

‘No-,’ I began to protest both declarations.

‘BELLA! I SEE HIS CAR AND me-

KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE! IF YOU-

AREN'T INSIDE THIS HOUSE IN ONE MINUTE…!’

Jack didn't bother to finish his threat.

‘Let's go, ‘Marcel said.

I looked back at Marcel, torn. Would I see him again?

‘Sorry,’ he whispered so low that I had to read his lips to understand. ''Bye, Bells.’ ‘You promised,’ I reminded him desperately. ‘Still friends, right?’

Part: 5

Marcel shook his head slowly, and the lump in my throat nearly strangled me.

‘You know how hard I've tried to keep that commitment, but… I can't see how to keep trying. Not now…’ He fought to keep his hard mask in place, but it hesitated and then disappeared. ‘Miss, you,’ he mouthed. One of his hands reached near me, his fingers outstretched like he wished they were long enough to cross the distance separating us.

‘Me, too,’ I choked out. My hand reached toward his across the wide space.

Like we were connected, the echo of his pain twisted inside me. His pain, my pain.

‘Maggie…’ I took a step toward him. I wanted to wrap my arms around his waist and erase the expression of misery on his face.

Marcel pulled me back again, his arms restraining instead of defending.

‘It's okay,’ I promised him, looking up to read his face with trust in my eyes.

He would understand…

His eyes were unreadable, his face expressionless. Cold. ‘No, it's not.’

‘Let her go,’ Marcel growled, furious again. ‘She wants to!’ He took two long strides forward. A glimmer of apprehension flashed in his eyes. His chest seemed to enlarge as it shuddered.

Marcel pushed me behind himself, wheeling to face Marcel.

‘No! Marcel!’

‘Come on! Jack's mad!’ My voice was panicked, but not because of Jack now. ‘Hurry!’

I tugged on him and he relaxed a little. He pulled me back slowly, always keeping his eyes on Marcel as we retreated.

Marcel watched us with a dark scowl on his bitter face. The anticipation drained from his eyes, and

then, just before the forest came between us, his face suddenly crumpled in pain.

I knew that the last glimpse of his face would haunt me until I saw him smile again.

And right there I vowed that I would see him smile, and soon. I would find a way to keep my friend.

Marcel kept his arm tight around my waist, holding me close. That was the only thing that held the tears in my eyes.

I had some serious problems.

My best friend counted me with his enemies. AVA and her girls were still on the loose, putting everyone I loved in danger. If I did not become an angel soon, the Ministry would kill me.

And now it seemed that if I did, the Ciguayo they sometimes take the shape of a sweet vampire, or wild horses would try to do the job themselves-along with trying to kill my future family. I didn't think they had

any chance really, but would my best friend get himself killed in the attempt?

This is why these girls love to ride horses.

Very serious problems in evil. So why did they all suddenly seem insignificant when we broke through the last of the trees and I caught sight of the expression on Jack's purple-blue face? Marcel squeezed me gently. ‘I'm here.’

I drew in a deep breath.

That was true. Marcel was here, with his arms around me.

I could face anything as long as that was true.

I squared my shoulders and walked forward to meet my fate, with my destiny solidly at my side.

Part: 6

Insignia

Life… after… time, that has past… it shows the story in all colors.

Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

‘Margot.’

One of the girls said, ‘Well…?’ No one moved.

‘Go on,’ whispered the girl.

They walked slowly down the hall in the sound of cold rain. They turned through the doorway to the room in the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue

and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence.

They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margot out.

‘Yes, Seven.’

Then one of them gave a little cry.

‘Margot!’

‘What?’

‘She’s still in the closet where we locked her.’

‘Margot.’

They stood as if someone had driven them, like so many stakes, into the floor. They looked at each other and then looked away. They glanced out at the world that was raining now and raining and raining steadily. They could not meet each other’s glances. Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

‘Margot.’

One of the girls said, ‘Well…?’ No one moved.

‘Go on,’ whispered the girl. They walked slowly down the hall in the sound of cold rain. They turned through the doorway to the room in the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence. They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margot out none of these stories is correct, however. Panic began as so many things do in Carp, a poor town of

twelve thousand people in the middle of nowhere: because it was summer, and there was nothing else to do. The rules are simple. The day after graduation is the Opening Jump, and the game goes all through summer. After the final challenge, the winner takes the pot.

Everyone at Carp High pays into the pot, with no exceptions. Fees are a dollar a day, for every day that school is in session, from September through June. People who refuse to pony up the cash receive reminders that go from gentle to persuasive:

vandalized locker, shattered windows, shattered face.

It’s only fair, anyone who wants to play has a chance to win. That’s another rule: all seniors, but only seniors, are eligible and must declare their intention to compete by participating in the Jump, the first of the difficulties.

Sometimes as many as forty kids enter.

There is only ever one winner. Two judges plan the game, name the challenges, deliver instructions, award,

and deduct points. They are selected by the judges of the previous year, in strict secrecy. No one, in the whole history of Panic, has ever confessed to being one. There have been suspicions, of course-rumors and speculation.

Carp is a small town, and judges get paid. How did Myra Campbell, who always stole extra lunch from the school cafeteria because there was no food at home, suddenly afford her used Honda? She said an uncle had died. But no one had ever heard of Myra's uncle-no one had ever thought

about Myra, until she came rolling in with the windows down, smoking a cigarette, with the sun so bright on the windshield, it almost completely obscured the smile on her face. Two judges, picked in secret, sworn to secrecy, working together. It must be this way. Otherwise, they'd be subject to bribes, and possibly to threats.

That's why there are two-to make sure that things stay stable, to diminish the possibility that one will cheat, and give out knowledge, leak hints. If the players know what to

expect, then they can equip. And that isn’t fair at all.

It’s partly the unexpectedness, the never-knowing, that starts to get to them, and weeds them out, one by one. The pot usually amounts to just over $50,000, after fees are deducted and the judges-whoever they take their cut. Four years ago, Jimi Hareson took his winnings, bought two items out of hock, one of them a lemon-yellow Ford, drove straight to Vegas, and bet it all on black.

The next year, Lauren Davis bought herself new teeth and a new pair of tits and moved to New York City.

Come on, come to Em, hurry.

That's where the reindeer were seen?

Look at our stockings.

And there's something in them!

Look, just what I always wanted. What are they?

What do they look like? They're marbles. See, these are your Jaspers, and these are your Peewees.

You did it all.

But...

Fooled ya, didn't I?

You!

Why are we always fighting so much?

I don't know.

That should be our New Year's revolution: to stop fighting so much.

-I'll try, but...

-But, what?

I don't know what's wrong with me when I say the things I say. I just keep on having all these strange thoughts.

What kind of thoughts?

Just thoughts...

Funny thoughts about you and me.

Tell me…

I couldn't…

They're just thoughts… They don't mean anything… Where did you find these?

I found them in those little shells.

They're beautiful. Thank you.

‘O come, all ye faithful…’ ‘O little town of Bethlehem…’ ‘Dashing through the snow, in a one-horse open sleigh…

‘All the’ Help! What's wrong? You're bleeding, don't! I'm all right. But you're bleeding- I say.

Go away! Don't look at me. Go away!

What was it, Em?

-Why were you bleeding like that?

-I don't know.

Liar! LI-ar!

It's true, I don't know. People don't bleed like that unless they've cut themselves. Maybe you're hurt bad and you just don't know it.

-Let me look.

-No! I don't want you to look.

-But, why?

-Just because.

That is not fair.

I don't keep any secrets from you. I tell you everything. Everything… what are you looking at? Your muscles… what about them? You're acting silly lately. Always saying dumb things like that. Always looking at me funny. You're not coming down with something, are you? Well, don't give it to me.

Tell me again, I said.

-Where are your mother and father?

-In heaven.

But where's heaven? You know, up there.

-Your father might be there, too.

-No, he's not.

He's coming on a ship someday to take us home.

Do you hear it? No…? Do you ever hear it? Sometimes- I think I do.

I think Paddy was a liar. He told us there was a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow...

...And that was a lie. He told us if we dug far enough, we'd reach China. Then Santa Claus never came.

Do you ever think about him? I do... I know you don't like to talk about it, but... don't you ever wonder what happened? I don't want to know what happened. I do... There are so many things I don't understand all of this- ah- yet.

Why? Why- do fish stop swimming and lie on top of the tide pools after it rains? Why do you hear the waves inside the big shells?

Why are all these funny hairs growing on me?

I wish a big book with all the answers to every question in the world... would drop out of the sky and land in my hand right now.

-I'd read it till I knew everything.

-You can't know everything.

Only God knows everything. God? He can't find us any better than Santa Claus.

I wonder what fish think about? What are you doing? Trying to cheer you up. Come on, laugh.

It's not going to work… There it is again… Do you think it's the bogeyman?

Maybe it's another person. No…? Otherwise, he would have come over to meet us, and say hello. That's the proper thing to do. What if he's not nice…? What if he wants to hurt us?

Then I'll spear him, look! I'm the greatest fisherman who ever lived.

I'm the greatest fisherman who ever lived. While you scare them off, I catch as many as I want to.

That's my fish dance! It doesn't scare them off. It brings them up to the surface where I can spear them.

Who cares what you say? It's not how many you catch. It's how you do it. Stop that!!!

I say!

Please play something else. Why must you do that when you know it makes me angry?

‘It doesn't scare them away. It brings 'em to the top... ‘...where I can spear them.’ I'll spear you.

Here I am. Come back here... or I'll pull your britches down and take a switch to you. Don't you dare try to spank me? I mean it. I'll put never-wake-up berries in your food! I mean it. Say, ‘Marcel is the smartest person

on the island.’

-Say it!

-Stop it, Marcel. I'm getting angry.

-Stop it! Now get off.

-Say it!

Marcel is the smartest person on the island.

-The fastest swimmer.

-The fastest swimmer.

-The fastest runner.

-The fastest runner.

-The best hut builder.

-You're the best at everything. Now get off!

It's true... Just you wait.

You'll never know when it'll happen. Just one little bite and you'll never wake up again.

-What is it? What happened?

-I saw him.

-Who?

-The Face Paddy thought was a bogeyman.

-Did you go to the other side?

-He's not the bogeyman.

I think he's God.

God?

He looks like Pastor Logan said he looked like: ‘You'd better be good or else.’ And he was bleeding.

-I don't believe you.

-Just like Jesus.

Don't go there again. It's the law.

What if he is God?

Shouldn't we go and pray? Or won't he be mad and not let us go to heaven?

I don't want to talk about it.

What is it?

I'm here.

-You ate the ‘dead and berries...’

-No, I'm fine.

-You just had a bad dream.

-Don't ever leave me.

Promise you won't.

Promise you'll always be with me.

I promise.

Don't.

What are you doing?

Go away!

Where are you going?

Wait. What's the matter?

-What are you doing?

-What do you want?

Why won't you talk to me?

Just leave me alone.

A ship, Emmeline!

The signal fire, you didn't light it.

Why didn't you light it?

You know how much I want to leave.

It's the most important thing to me.

I know. First, you cry for help, then you throw sticks at me.

A ship comes, a ship! The first ship we've seen since we've been here, and you let it go by.

Well, that's it. I've had it. I'm sick and tired of waiting for you to get better.

I'm going to San Francisco without you. You'll never build a boat strong enough to get to San Francisco.

That's the fourth time you've tried, and they've all sunk.

Shut up!

Why don't you give up?

You don't even know where San Francisco is.

You're such a silly dodo.

We're never getting off this island.

Thanks to you.

This is where we live.

This is our home, now and forever.

No!

I could never live here forever with just you.

I don't even like you.

You never used to laugh at me.

You never used to have secrets.

You're not so perfect either, Mr. Marcel.

I've seen you playing with it.

And I'll tell your father if he ever gets here.

You…

I hate you…

You almost hit me… -Take back what you said.

-I've seen it all.

What happens after you do it for a long time?

Shut up! That isn't fair, peeking.

-I don't peek on you.

-That's a lie.

You're always staring at my buppies’.

Only because they look so funny.

Do you know what you look like now? You look like one of those pictures Paddy had.

One of his Hoochie Coochie girls.

I do not!

Stop that, or I'll never talk to you again.

See them jiggle, wiggle, and shake.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you.

I wish you were dead and buried.

What are you doing?

It's my hut, I built it.

That's not true. I helped you.

I did most of it.

You can find some other place to live.

I said I was sorry, Marcel.

What more do you want me to say?

I don't want you to say anything.

I don't ever want to see you again.

You just wait, Marcel.

I'll get you for this!

What's wrong with you?

Go away.

What happened?

I stepped on one of those fish that looks like a rock.

Don't go to sleep.

Oh, no. Please wake up.

God.

Take me to God.

But the law...

God...

...Please don't make Em never wake up.

I didn't mean it when I said I wanted her dead and buried.

I forgot most of my prayers, God...

But... Our Father... who art in heaven... kingdom come... with liberty and justice for all.

Amen.

Part: 7

Beach love

25- is the new 17! I can believe what I have passed up…

>said this girl here<

(I wish not to say who I am… who do you think I am?)

Em, are you, all right? I've been so worried.

You mean, you're not mad at me anymore? Of course, not… I was so scared.

All I could think of was: what if I lost my Em? What would I do? Here's

some food to help you get your strength back.

Do you see that island out there?

Yes…

I've been thinking, maybe the person who makes the drum noise… lives there and then comes here to pray. Maybe. …Maybe it is all I have… Would you like to try to walk?

You, all right?

Yes. Kiss me… he said, looking into my love-stricken eyes… You're all gross- like I said back.

So, what? Kiss me like you always wanted too long and slow like.

HOT!

Stop it, I can't breathe. It was so-o nice- long and soft feels sweet and loving. Like a nice hug from the one you always wanted to be with… like falling into them… like falling to them… it’s the melting into them that is love…

But I don't want to stop. What are you doing?

Stop it, I say to him as he feels me up there… in-between… I feel so funny in my stomach. Me, too, I am okay with this it's slutty, but what hell, I want it. His heart is beating so fast I hear it as I am laying on him with my head on his chest. Mine, too… Come on up, keep me warm, I side upon him, and do so… while kissing him… What's the matter? I'm sorry, Blair, that it was not that long- yet was right- right? You didn't want it all day yesterday either.

Don't you love me anymore? Yes, I love you more than ever, Blair. Then why don't you want to do it? It just hurts right now, that's all. When it stops hurting, we'll do it. When is that going to be? I don't understand. Why does it hurt? I don't know… why you feel so much down there… I did this before… so… so… um… maybe not, I said back I knew.

Hello, baby. Answer me, and say you love me… Tell me what to do… and I will please you as much as I can…

I want to make you happy with me in all ways.

He said to me- I don't know anything. But if you touch my tummy right now, you can feel it. Feel what? How did you make your tummy move like that? I'm not doing it. It's not doing it by itself… I want you to do me… Yes, it is. There… I felt it again, his love for me. What's making it do that? I don't know… really… it feels good… so go… with it. What's wrong with what I am doing? Nothing- Did I hurt you- go too hard?

Look, I think he's hungry, with that look on his face… it was love… for me… What did they look like?

I don't want to talk about it. I don’t know why I feel this way about you… I just do…

If they come, I'll do to them what I do to the fish.

I'll stick it in their eyes! I'll stick it through their bellies and watch their guts come out! Remember on the ship when we tried to get to the dinghy…

...How the men pushed and shoved each other?

How did their eyes look?

Look at all the Water blue-green whooshing. It was the same with the drum people.

I don't understand. Why do people have to be so bad to each other? I'm busy keeping watch. Come here, hurry. Come on, you have to see this. You taught him to swim. around the tree, there was a boat, that we used for our fun-we had this loved spot all to ourselves- the lost beach- where we

went to have what was so wrong to them. Look at the bird. Look, Priced-Day.

Do you see some fish? What do you see? We’re out there we are now in the water naked- looking at all the things in the sea do you see that ship? Big- I said. Blair.

Yes? He said my name. as we rain back up on the lost lovers’ beach, we're making footprints- being playful with each other. Remember the snowball fights we had every time it snowed? We say together- side by side

and tight… it's freezing no… I remember that… look at us now… It's was cold.

I love you…

~*~

I want to see it again… and- over and- over-and-over. What are you doing? Get those out of your mouth. she swallowed some.

Come here.

Don't close your eyes…Please don't go to sleep. Please.

(Fade)

I thought you were afraid. Of not being with me- take me there? Sure. I go there for bananas, myself... not getting along… at all at this point. Are you coming?

The next day in the hut- they made- it was part of the fun of doing this they said. Can we go closer to me jezz? Sorry- let's go- were now out- I'll see the moonlight, swimming now with her over a careful reef. Look at that face, it was a thought I had. The blue boat was overhead.

I can't stop this, yet we're drifting, for the boat... Look how far out we are! Shark! Look... When it hits the water, you can hear it hiss. Look, see? Hear it?

-Where did you get those?

-Get those out of your mouth.

I can't make it out...

Swim... swim...

And we did...

Not by much, we made it out...

Remember me Shy-?

I got what I wanted too…

Thanks, Jenny for being a d*ck, it took this long for your shit to stop- and get I boy to love me. ROT IN HELL!

B*TCH!

This was always where the girl came with their guys back in the day… the cove… next to the falls…

Part 8

Anecdotes

(Cut)

She recovered to Carp two Christmases later, stayed just long

enough to show off a new purse and an even newer nose, and then blew back to the downtown. Hearsays floated back: she was dating the producer of some reality TV weight-loss show; she was becoming AVA's Secret model, though no one has ever seen her in a catalog. (And many of the boys have seen.)

Conrad Spurlock went into the manufacture of methamphetamines-his father's line of business-and poured the money into a new shed on Mallory

Road, after their last place burned straight to the ground.

But Sean McManus used the money to go to college; he's thinking of becoming a doctor. And this was the way life was forever on the planet Venus, and this was the schoolroom of the children of the rocket men and women who had come to a rainy world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

In seven years of playing, there have been three deaths-four including Jimi Hareson, who shot himself with the

second thing he'd bought at the pawnshop after his number came up red.

Do you see it? Even the winner of Panic is afraid of something. So: back to the day after graduation, the opening day of Panic, the day of the Jump. Rewind to the beach but pause a few hours before Maggie stood on the ridge, suddenly petrified, afraid to jump.

Turn the camera slightly. We're not quite there. Almost, though. Marcel

NO ONE ON THE BEACH WAS CHEERING

FOR Marcel Mason-no one would cheer for him either, no matter how far he got.

It didn’t matter. All that mattered was the win. And Marcel had a secret-he knew something about Panic, knew more about it, probably than any of the other people on the beach.

He had two secrets. Marcel liked secrets… They fueled him, gave him a sense of power. When he was

little, he'd even fantasized that he had his secret world, a private place of shadows, where he could curl up and hide.

Even now-on Dayna's bad days, when the pain came roaring back and she started to cry, when his mom hosed the place down with Fiberize and invited over her newest Piece of Shit date, and late at night Marcel could hear the bed frame hitting the wall, like a punch in the stomach every time he thought about sinking into that dark space, cool and private.

Everyone at school thought Marcel was a pussy. He knew that.

He looked like a pussy. He'd always been tall and skinny-angles and corners, his mom said, just like his father. As far as he knew, the angles- and the dark skin- were the only things he had in common with his dad, a Dominican roofer his mom had been with for one hot second back in Miami. Marcel could never even remember his name… Roberto. Or Rodrigo… Some shit like that.

Back when they'd first gotten stuck in Carp (that's how he always thought about it getting stuck-he, Dayna, and his mom was just like empty plastic bags skipping across the country on fitful bits of wind, occasionally getting snagged around a telephone pole or under the tires of some semi, pinned in place for a bit), he'd been beaten up three times: once by Greg O'Hare, then by Zavic Keller, and then by Greg O'Hare again, just to make sure that Marcel knew the rules. And Marcel hadn't swung back, not once.

He’d had worse before. Besides that, it was Marcel’s second secret and the source of his power. He wasn’t afraid. He just didn’t care, and that was very, very different.

The sky was streaked with red and purple and orange. It reminded Marcel of an enormous bruise, or a picture taken of the inside of a body. It was still an hour or so before sunset and before the pot, and then the Jump would be announced.

Marcel cracked a beer. His first and only. He didn't want to be buzzed and didn't need to be either.

But it had been a hot day, and he'd come straight from Home Depot, and he was thirsty. The crowd had only just started to assemble. Periodically, Marcel- heard the muffled slamming of a car door, a shout of greeting from the woods, the distant blare of music.

Whippoorwill Road was a quarter-mile away; kids were just starting to emerge from the path, fighting their way through the thick

underbrush, swatting away hanging moss and creeper vines, carting coolers and blankets, and bottles and iPod speakers, staking out patches of sand. The school was done for good, forever. He took a deep breath. Of all the places, he had lived- New Orleans-New York, Chicago, DC, Dallas, Richmond, Ohio, Rhode Island, Oklahoma, smelled the best. Like growth and change, things turning over, and becoming other things. Ray Hanrahan and his friends had arrived first. That was unsurprising.

Even though competitors weren't officially announced until the moment of the Jump, Ray had been bragging for months that he was going to take home the pot, just like his brother had two years earlier. Luke had won, just barely, in the last round of Panic. Luke had walked away with fifty-grand. The other driver hadn't walked away at all. If the doctors were right, she'd never walk again. Marcel flipped a coin in his palm, made it disappear, then reappear easily between his fingers. In fourth grade, his mom's boyfriend-he couldn't remember which

one had bought him a book about magic tricks.

They'd been living in Oklahoma that year, a shithole in a flat bowl in the middle of the country, where the sun singed the ground to dirt and the grass to gray, and he'd spent a whole summer teaching himself how to pull coins from someone's ear and slip a card into his pocket so quickly, it was unnoticeable. It had started as a way to pass the time but had become a kind of obsession. There was something elegant about it: how people saw

without seeing, how the mind fills in what is expected, how the eyes betrayed you.

Terror, he knew, was one big magic trick. The judges were the magicians; the rest of them were just a dumb, gaping audience.

Part: 9

Lifeguard Chair

Mike Dickinson came next, along with two friends, all of them visibly drunk. The D*ck's hair had started to thin, and patches of his scalp

were visible when he bent down to deposit his cooler on the beach. His friends were carrying a half-rotted lifeguard chair between them: the throne, where Diggin, the announcer, would sit during the event. Marcel heard a high whine. He smacked unthinkingly, catching the mosquito just as it started to feed, smearing a bit of black on his bare calf. He hated mosquitoes. Spiders, too, although he liked other insects, found them fascinating. Like humans, in a way - stupid and sometimes vicious, blinded by need.

The sky was deepening; the light was fading and so were the colors, swirling away behind the line of trees beyond the ridge, as though someone had pulled the plug. Maggie Nill was next on the beach, followed by Nat Velez, and lastly, Bishop Marks, trotting happily after them like an overgrown sheepdog. Even from a distance, Marcel could tell both girls were on edge. Maggie had done something with her hair. He wasn't sure what, but it wasn't wrestled into its usual ponytail, and it even looked like she might have straightened it. And

he wasn’t sure, but he thought she might be wearing makeup.

He debated getting up and going over to say hi. Maggie was cool. He liked how tall she was, how tough, too, in her way. He liked her broad shoulders and the way she walked, straight-backed, even though he was sure she would have liked to be a few inches shorter could tell from the way she wore only flats and sneakers with worn down soles.

But if he got up, he’d have to talk to Natalie-and even looking at Nat

from across the beach made his stomach seize up like he'd been kicked. Nat wasn't exactly mean to him-not like some of the other kids at, school but she wasn't exactly nice, either, and that bothered him more than anything else. She usually smiled vaguely when she caught him talking to Maggie, and as her eyes skated past him, through him, he knew that she would never, ever, actually look at him. Once, at the homecoming bonfire last year, she'd even called him Dave.

He'd gone just because he was hoping to see her. And then, in the crowd, he had spotted her; had moved toward her, buzzed from the noise and the heat and the shot of whiskey he'd taken in the parking lot, intending to talk to her, really talk to her, for the first time. Just as he was reaching out to touch her elbow, she had taken a step backward, onto his foot.

'Oops! Sorry, Dave,' she'd said, giggling.

Her breath smelled like vanilla and vodka. And his stomach had

opened up, and his guts went straight onto his shoes. There were only

107 people in their graduating class, out of the 150 who'd started at Carp High freshman year. And she didn't even know his name. So, he stayed where he was, working his toes into the ground, waiting for the dark, waiting for the whistle to blow and for the games to begin. He was going to win Terror. He was going to do it for Dayna. He was going to do it for revenge.

Maggie ‘TESTING, TESTING. ONE, TWO, -THREE.’ THAT WAS DIGGING, testing the megaphone. The old quarry off Whippoorwill Road, empty since the late 1800s, had been flooded in the fifties to make a swimming hole. On the south side was the beach: a narrow strip of sand and stone, supposedly off-limits after dark, but rarely used before then; a dump of cigarette butts, crushed beer cans, empty Baggies, and sometimes, disgustingly, condoms, scattered limply on the ground like tubular jellyfish.

Tonight, it was crowded-packed with blankets and beach chairs, heavy with the smell of mosquito repellent and booze.

Maggie closed her eyes and inhaled. This was the smell of Panic-the smell of summer. At the edge of the water, there was an explosion of color and sound, shrieks of laughter. Firecrackers. In the quick glare of red and green light, Maggie saw Kaitlin Frost and Shayna Lambert laughing, doubled over, while Patrick Culbert tried to get a few more flares to light. It

was weird. Graduation had been only yesterday- Maggie had bailed on the ceremony, since Krista, her mom, wouldn't show, and there was no point in pretending there was some big glory in floating through four years of mandated classes. But already she felt years and years away from high school like it had all been one long, unmemorable dream.

Maybe, she thought, it was because people didn't change. All the days had simply blurred together and would now be suctioned away into the

past. Nothing ever happened in Carp. There were no surprises. Digging's voice echoed through the crowd.

Part: 10

Hollered

'Welcome to the second challenge,' Digging boomed out.

'Suck it, Rodgers,' a guy yelled, and there were whoops and scattered laughs.

Someone else said, 'Sh-h.' Digging pretended he hadn't heard:

‘This is a test of bravery and balance-’

‘And sobriety!’

‘Dude, I’m going to fall.’

More laughter. Maggie couldn’t even smile. Next, to her, Natalie was fidgeting turning to the right and left, touching her hip bones. Maggie couldn’t even ask what she was doing.

Digging kept plowing on: ‘A test of speed, too, since all the contestants will be timed-’

‘Jesus, get on with it.’ Digging finally lost it. He wrenched the megaphone from his mouth. ‘Shut the hell up, Lee.’ This provoked a new round of laughter. To Maggie, it all felt off like she was watching a movie and the sound was a few seconds too late.

She couldn’t stop herself from looking up now-at that single beam, a few bare inches of wood, stretched fifty feet above the ground. The Jump was a tradition, more for fun than for anything else, a plunge into the water. This would be a plunge to the hard

earth, packed ground. No chance of surviving it.

There was a momentary stutter when the truck engine gave out, and everything went dark. There were shouts of protest; and when, a few seconds later, the engine gunned on-again, Maggie saw Matt: standing in the beam of the headlights, laughing, one hand in the back of Delaney's jeans. Her stomach rolled over. Weirdly, it was that fact-the way he had his hand shoved up against her butt-more than even seeing them together,

that made her sick. He had never once touched her in that way, had even complained that couples who stood like that, hand-to-butt, should be shot.

Maybe he'd thought she wasn't cute enough. Maybe he'd been embarrassed by her. Maybe he had just been lying then, to spare her feelings.

Maybe she'd never really known him.

This thought struck her with terror.

If she didn’t know Joel Flores-the boy who’d once applauded after she burped the alphabet, who’d even, once, noticed that she had a little period blood on the outside of her white shorts and not made a big deal of it, and pretended not to be grossed out-then she couldn’t count on knowing any of these people, or what they were capable of.

Suddenly she was aware of stillness, a pause in the flow of laughter and conversation, as though everyone had drawn breath at once. And she

realized that Kim Hollister was inching out onto the plank, high above their heads, her face stark-white and terrified and that the challenge had started. It took Kim forty-seven seconds to inch her way across, shuffling, keeping her right foot always in front of her left.

When she reached the second water tower safely, she briefly embraced it with both arms, and the crowd exhaled as one.

Then came Fred Harte: he made it even faster, taking the short,

clipped steps of a tightrope walker. And then Merl Tracey. Even before he'd crossed to safety, digging lifted the megaphone and trumpeted the next name. 'Maggie Nill! Maggie Nill, to the stage!'

'Good luck, Heath- bar,' Natalie said.

'Don't look down.'

'Thanks,' Maggie said automatically, even as she registered it as ridiculous advice.

When you’re fifty feet in the air, where else do you look but down?

She felt as though she were moving in silence, although she knew, too, that that was unlikely-Digging couldn’t keep his mouth off that stupid megaphone for anything. It was just because she was afraid; afraid and still thinking, stupidly, miserably, about Matt, and wondering whether he was watching her with his hand still shoved down the back of Delaney’s pants.

As she began to climb the ladder that ran up one leg of the

eastern water tower, her fingers numb on the cold, slick metal, it occurred to her that he'd be staring at her butt, and feeling Delaney's butt, and that was sick.

Then it occurred to her that everyone could see her butt, and she had a brief moment of panic, wondering if her underwear lines were visible through her jeans, since she just couldn't stomach thongs and didn't understand girls who could. She was already halfway up the ladder by then, and it further occurred to her that if

she was stressing so hard about underwear lines, she couldn't truly be afraid of the height.

For the first time, she began to feel more confident. But the rain was a problem. It made the rungs of the ladder slick under her fingers. It blurred her vision and made the treads of her sneakers slip. When she finally reached the small metal ledge that ran along the circumference of the water tank and hauled herself to her feet, the fear came swinging back.

There was nothing to hold on to, only smooth, wet metal behind her back, and air omnipresent. Only a few inches difference between being alive and not. A tingle worked its way from her feet to her legs and up into her palms, and for a second, she was worried not of falling but of jumping, springing out into the mysterious air.

She shuffled sideways toward the wooden beam, pressing her back as hard as she could against the tank, praying that from below she didn’t look as frightened as she felt. Crying out,

hesitating-it would all be counted against her.

‘Time!’

Digging’s voice boomed out from below. Maggie knew she had to move if she wanted to stay in the game. Maggie forced herself away from the tank and inched forward onto the wooden plank, which had been barely secured to the ledge utilizing several twisted screws. She had a sudden image of wood snapping under her weight, a wild hurtle through space. But the wood held.

She raised her arms unconsciously for balance, no longer thinking of Matt or Delaney or Joh Joh staring up at her, or anything other than all that thin air, the horrible prickling in her feet and legs, an itch to jump.

She could move faster if she paced normally, one foot in front of the other, but she couldn’t bring herself to break contact with the board; if she lifted afoot, a heel, a toe, she would collapse, she would swing to one side and die.

She was conscious of deep silence, a quiet so heavy she could hear the fizz of the rain, could hear her breathing, shallow, and quick. Beneath her was blinding light, the kind of light you'd see just before you died.

All the people had merged with shadow, and for a second, she was afraid she had died, that she was all alone on a tiny, bare surface, with an endless fall into the dark on either side of her. Inch by inch, going as fast as she could without lifting her feet.

And then, all at once, she was done -she had reached the second water tower and found herself hugging the tank, like Kim had done, pressing flat against it, letting her sweatshirt get soaked. A cheer went up, even as another name was announced: Ray Hanrahan.

Her head was ringing, and her mouth was perceived like alloy. Over. It was over. Her arms felt suddenly useless, her flesh weak with relief, as she made her way stumblingly down the ladder, dropping the last few feet

and taking two stumbling steps before righting herself. Souls reached out, hugged her shoulders, patted her on the back. She didn't know if she grinned or not.

'You were amazing!' Nat barreled to her through the crowd. Maggie barely registered the feel of Nat's arms around her neck. 'Is it scary? Where you freaked?'

Maggie shook her head, conscious of people still watching her. 'It went quick,' she said. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she felt

better. It was over. She was standing in the middle of a crowd: the air smelled like damp fleece and cigarette smoke.

Solid- Real!

‘Forty-two seconds,’ Nat said proudly. Maggie hadn’t even heard her time be announced.

‘Where’s Joh Joh?’ Maggie asked. Now she was starting to feel good. A bubbly feeling was working its way through her. Forty-two seconds. Not bad.

‘He was right behind me...’ Nat turned to scan the crowd, but the truck’s headlights turned everyone into silhouettes, dark brushstroke people. Another cheer erupted.

Maggie looked up and saw that Ray had crossed already. Digging’s voice echoed out hollowly: ‘Twenty-two seconds! A record so far!’

Maggie swallowed back a sour taste. She hated Ray Hanrahan. In seventh grade, when she still hadn’t developed boobs, he stuck a training bra to the outside of her locker and

spread a rumor that she was taking medicine to turn into a boy. ‘Got any chin hairs yet?’ he’d say when he passed her in the halls. He only left her alone once Joh Joh threatened to tell the cops that Luke Hanrahan was selling weed from Pepe’s, where he worked, slipping bags of pot under the slice if patrons asked for ‘extra oregano.’ Which he was.

It was Zavic Keller’s turn next.

Part: 11

Root For

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I have an announcement: the school’s out for summer.’ Everyone cheered… There was a no their pop- pop- pop, a burst of firecrackers. They were in the middle of the woods, five miles from the nearest house. They could make all the noise they wanted. They could shout. They could scream. No one would hear them.

Maggie’s stomach seized up. It was starting. She knew Nat must be freaking out. She knew she should say something encouraging to her-Maggie and Bishop were there for Natalie, to

give her moral support. Bishop had even made a poster: Go, Nat, he had written. Next, to the words, he had drawn a huge stick figure -Natalie could tell it was supposed to be here because the stick figure was wearing a pink sweatshirt-standing on a pile of money.

'How come Nat's not wearing any pants?' Maggie had asked.

'Maybe she lost them during the Jump,' Bishop said. He turned, grinning, to Nat. Whenever he smiled like that, his eyes went from syrup

brown to honey-colored. ‘Drawing was never my thing.’

Maggie didn’t like to talk about Matt in front of Bishop. She couldn’t stand the way he rolled his eyes when she brought him up as she’d just switched the radio to a bad pop station.

But finally, she couldn’t help it. ‘He’s still not here.’ Maggie spoke in a low voice, so only Nat would hear her.

‘Sorry, Nat. I know this isn’t the time- I mean; we came for you-’

‘It’s okay.’ Nat reached out and squeezed Maggie’s hand with both of her own. She pulled a weird face as someone had just made her chug a limeade. ‘Look. Matt doesn’t deserve you. Okay? You can do better than Matt.’

Maggie half laughed. ‘You’re my best friend, Nat,’ she said. ‘You aren’t supposed to lie to me.’ Nat shook her head. ‘I’m sure he’ll be here soon. The game’s about to start.’ Maggie checked her phone again, for the millionth time. Nothing. She’d powered

it down several times and rebooted it, just to make sure it was working.

Digging's voice boomed out again:

'The rules of Panic are simple. Anyone can enter. But only one person will win.'

Digging announced the pot.

$67,000.

Maggie felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach. $67,000. That had to be the biggest pot ever. The crowd began to buzz-the number

ran through them like an electric current, jumping from lip to lip. Shit, man, you'd have to be crazy not to play. Nat looked as though she'd just taken a large spoonful of ice cream.

Digging plunged on, ignoring the noise. He announced the rules-a half-dozen events, spaced throughout the summer, conducted under conditions of strictest privacy; eliminations after every round; individual challenges for each contestant who made it past the halfway, mark-but nobody was

listening. It was the same speech as always. Maggie had been watching Panic since she was in eighth grade.

She could have made the speech herself.

That number-67,000-wrapped itself around her heart and squeezed. Without meaning to, she thought of all she could do with the money; she thought of how far she could go, what she could buy, how long she could live. How many miles away from Carp she could get.

But no. She couldn’t leave Matt. Matt had said he loved her. He was her plan. The grip on her heart eased a little, and she found she could breathe again. Next, to Maggie, Natalie shimmied out of her jean shorts and kicked off her shoes. ‘Can you believe it?’ she said. She took off her shirt, shivering in the wind. Maggie couldn’t believe she’d insisted on that ridiculous bikini, which would fly off as soon as she hit the water. Natalie had only laughed. Maybe, she’d joked, that would earn her extra points.

That was Natalie: stubborn. Vain, too. Maggie still couldn't understand why she'd even chosen to play. Nat was afraid of everything.

Someone-probably Billy Wallace- whistled. 'Nice ass, Velez.' Nat ignored him, but Maggie could tell she had heard and was pretending not to be pleased.

Maggie wondered what Billy Wallace would say if she tried to wear a scrap of fabric like that on her butt. Whoa. Look at the size of that thing! Do you need a permit to carry that thing

around, Maggie? But Matt loved her. Matt thought she was pretty. The noise on the beach swelled, grew to a roar: hoots and screams, people waving homemade banners and flags, firecrackers exploding like a smattering of gunfire, and she knew it was time. The whistle would blow.

Terror was about to begin. Just then Maggie saw him. The crowd parted temporarily; she could see him, smiling, talking to someone; then the crowd shifted again, and she lost sight of him. ‘He’s here. Nat, he’s here.’

‘What?’ Nat wasn’t paying attention anymore.

Maggie’s voice dried up in her throat. Because the crowd had opened again, just as she’d started moving toward him, as though directed by gravity-relief welling in her chest, a chance to make things right, a chance to do things right, for once-and in that second, she had seen that he was speaking to Delaney O’Brien.

Not just speaking.

Whispering…

And then: kissing. The whistle blew sharp and thin in the sudden silence, like the cry of an alien bird.

Maggie reached the top of the ridge just as Derek Klieg got a running start and hurled himself into the air, body contorted, shouting.

A few seconds later, a cheer went up as he hit. Natalie was crouching a few feet away from the edge, her face pale; for a second,

Maggie thought she heard her counting. Then Nat turned and blinked repeatedly, as though trying to bring

Maggie’s face into focus. She opened her mouth and closed it again.

Maggie’s heart was beating hard and high. ‘Hey, Nat,’ she said, just as Natalie straightened up.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Natalie spat out. Now Maggie registered everything, all at once: the ache in her hands and thighs, the pain in her fingers, the sharp bite of the wind. Natalie looked furious. She was shaking, although that might have been the cold.

‘I’m going to jump,’ Maggie said, realizing, as she said it, how stupid it sounded how stupid it was. All of a sudden, she thought she might puke.

I’ll be cheering for you; Maggie had said to Natalie. The guilt was there, throbbing alongside nausea. But Matt’s voice was bigger than everything.

Matt’s voice, and underneath it a vision of the water stains above her bed; the dull thud of music from the park; the smell of weed and cigarettes;

the sounds of laughing, and later, someone screaming, you're a dumb piece of… Shit! ‘You can’t jump,’ Nat said, still staring. ‘I’m jumping.’

‘We’ll jump together,’ Maggie said.

Natalie took two steps forward. Maggie noticed she was balling her fists almost rhythmically. Squeeze, relax.

Squeeze, relax. Three times.

‘Why are you doing this?’ The question was almost a whisper.

Maggie couldn’t answer. She didn’t even know, not exactly. All she knew-all she could feel was that this was her last chance.

So-o she just said, ‘I’m going to jump now. Before I chicken out.’

When she turned toward the water, Natalie reached for Maggie, as if to pull her back. But she didn’t.

Maggie felt as though the rock underneath her had begun to move, bucking like a horse. She had a sudden terror that she was going to lose her balance and go tumbling down the

rocky slope, cracking her head in the shallows.

Fear. She took small, halting steps forward, and still reached the edge far too quickly.

‘Announce yourself!’ Digging boomed out. Below Maggie, the water, black as oil, was still churning with bodies. She wanted to shout down- move, move, I’m going to hit you-but she couldn’t speak. She could hardly breathe. Her lungs felt like they were being pressed between two stones.

And suddenly she couldn't think of anything but Chris Heinz, who five years ago drank a fifth of vodka before doing the jump and lost his footing. The sound his head made as it cracked against the rock was delicate, almost like an egg breaking. She remembered the way everyone ran through the woods; the image of his body, broken and limp, lying half-submerged in the water.

'Say your name!' Digging prompted again, and the crowd picked up the chant: Name, name, name.

She opened her mouth. ‘Maggie,’ she croaked out. ‘Maggie Nill.’ Her voice broke, got whipped back by the wind.

The chant was still going: Name, name, name, name. Then: Jump, jump, jump, jump.

Her insides were white; filled with snow. Her mouth tasted a little like puke. She took a deep breath. She closed her eyes.

She jumped.

Part: 12

SATURDAY, JUNE 25

~Maggie~

MAGGIE HAD ONCE READ AN ARTICLE ONLINE ABOUT how time was

relative and moved faster or slower depending on where you were and what you were doing. But she had never understood why it moved slower during the awful stuff-math class, dentist appointments-and speeded up whenever you tried to make time go slow. Like when you were taking a test, or at your birthday party.

Or, in this case, dreading something.

Why? Why- did time have to be the wrong kind of relative? She had never regretted anything as much as she regretted making the decision, on the beach, to enter the game. In the days that followed, it seemed to her like a kind of insanity. Maybe she'd inhaled too much booze vapor on the beach. Maybe seeing Matt with Delaney had driven her temporarily psychotic.

That happened, didn't it? Weren't whole defenses built on that

kind of thing, when people went crazy and hacked their ex-wives to pieces with an ax? But she was too proud to withdraw now. And the date of the first official challenge kept drawing nearer. Even though the breakup made her want to go into permanent hiding, although she was doing her best to avoid everyone who knew her even vaguely, the news had reached her: the water towers near Copake had been defaced, painted over with a date. Saturday. Sundown.

A message and invitation to all the players.

Matt was gone. The school was over.

Not that she'd ever liked school, but still. It got her out of the house; it was something to do. Now everything was over and done. It occurred to her that this was her life: vast and empty, like a coin dropping down a bottomless well. She moved as slowly as she could, spent her nights curled on the couch watching TV with her sister, Lily, turned off her phone

when she wasn’t obsessively checking it for calls from

Matt...

She didn’t want to deal with Bishop, who would lecture her and tell her that Matt was an idiot anyway; and Nat spent three days giving her the cold shoulder before admitting, finally, that she wasn’t that mad anymore. Time tumbled, cascaded on, as though life had been set to fast-forward. Finally, Saturday came, and she couldn’t avoid it anymore.

She didn’t even have to bother to sneak out. Earlier in the evening, her mom and her stepdad, Bo, had gone over to some bar in Ancram, which meant they wouldn’t be stumbling home until the early hours or, possibly, Sunday afternoon-bleary-eyed, reeking of smoke, probably starving and in a foul mood. Maggie made mac ’n’ cheese for Lily, who ate in sullen silence in front of the TV. Lily’s hair was parted exactly down the middle, combed straight, and fixed in a hard knot at the back of her head. Recently she had been wearing it like that, and it

made her look like an old woman stuck in an eleven-year-old body.

Lily was giving her the silent treatment, and Maggie didn't know why, but she didn't have enough energy to worry about it. Lily was like that: stormy one minute, smiley the next. Recently, she'd been more on the stormy side- more serious, too, very careful about what she wore and how she fixed her hair, quieter, less likely to laugh until she snorted milk, less likely to beg Maggie for a story before she went to bed-but Maggie figured she

was just growing up. There wasn't that much to smile about in Carp. There wasn't much to smile about in Fresh Pines Mobile Park.

Still, it made Maggie's chest ache a little. She missed the old Lily: sticky Dr. Pepper hands, the smell of the bubblegum breath, hair that was never combed, and glasses that were always smudgy. She missed Lily's eyes, wide in the dark, as she rolled over and whispered, 'Tell me a story, Maggie.' But that was the way it worked- evolution, she guessed; the order of

things. At seven-thirty p.m., Bishop texted her to say that he was on his way.

Lily had withdrawn to the Corner, which was what Maggie called their bedroom: a narrow, cramped room with two beds squeezed practically side by side; a chest of drawers missing a leg, which rocked violently when it was opened; a chipped lamp and a varnish-spotted nightstand; clothes heaped everywhere, like snowdrifts. Lily was lying in the dark, blankets drawn up to her chin.

Maggie assumed she was sleeping and was about to close the door, when Lily turned to her, sitting up on one elbow. In the moonlight coming through the dirty windowpane, her eyes were like polished marbles.

‘Where are you going?’ She said. Maggie navigated around a tangle of jeans and sweatshirts, underwear, and balled-up socks.

She sat down on Lily’s bed. She was glad that Lily wasn’t asleep. She was glad, too, that Lily had decided to talk to her after all.

‘Bishop and Nat are picking me up,’ she said, avoiding the question. ‘We’re going to hang out for a little while.’

Lily lay down again, huddling in her blankets. For a minute, she didn’t say anything. Then: ‘Are you coming back?’ Maggie felt her chest squeeze up.

She leaned over to place a hand on Lily’s head. Lily jerked away. ‘Why would you say something like that, billy-goat?’

Lily didn’t answer. For several minutes Maggie sat there, her heart racing in her chest, feeling helpless and alone in the dark. Then she heard Lily’s breathing and knew she had fallen asleep. Maggie leaned over and kissed her sister’s head. Lily’s skin was hot and wet, and Maggie had the urge to climb into bed with her, to wake her up and apologize for everything: for the ants in the kitchen and the water stains on the ceiling; for the smells of smoke and the shouting from outside; for their mom, Krista, and their stepdad, Bo; for the pathetic life they’d been thrust into,

narrow as a tin can. But she heard a light honk from outside, so instead, she got up, closing the door behind her.

Maggie could always tell Bishop was coming by the sound of his cars. His dad had owned a garage once, and Joh-John was a car freak. He was good at building things; several years ago, he'd made Maggie arose out of petals of copper, with a steel stem and little screws for thorns.

He was always tinkering with rusted pieces of junk he picked up from God-knows-where. His newest was a Le

Sabre with an engine that sounded like an old man trying to choke out a belt buckle. Maggie took the shotgun. Natalie was sitting in the back. Weirdly, Natalie always insisted on sitting b*tch, in the exact middle, even if there was no one else in the car. She'd told Maggie that she didn't like picking sides-left or right-because it always felt like she was betting on her life. Maggie had explained to her a million times that it was more dangerous to sit in the middle, but Nat didn't listen. 'I can't believe you roped me into this,' Joh Joh said when Maggie

got in the car. It was raining the kind of rain that didn’t so much fall as materialize, as though it was being exhaled by a giant mouth. There was no point in using an umbrella or rain jacket-it was coming from all directions at once and got in collars and under shirtsleeves and down the back.

Part: 13

Failsafe

‘Please…’ She cinched her hoodie a bit tighter. ‘Cut the holier-than-thou crap. You’ve always watched the game.’

‘Yeah, but that was before my two best friends decided to go bat-shit and join.’

‘We get it, Joh-John,’ Nat said. ‘Turn on some music, will you?’

‘No can do, my lady.’ Joh-John reached into the cup holder and handed Maggie a Slurpee from 7-Eleven. Blue. Her favorite. She took a sip and felt a good freeze in her head. ‘Radio’s busted. I’m doing some work on the wiring-’ Nat cut him off, groaning exaggeratedly. ‘Not again.’

‘What can I say? I love fixer-uppers.’ He patted the steering wheel as he accelerated onto the highway. As if in response, the Le Sabre made a shrill whine of protest, followed by several emphatic bangs and a horrifying rattle, as if the engine were coming apart.

‘I’m pretty sure the love is not mutual,’ Nat said, and Maggie laughed, and felt a little less nervous. As Joh-John angled the car off the road and bumped into the narrow, packed-dirt one-liner that ran the periphery of the

park, NO TRESPASSING signs were lit up intermittently amid his headlights.

Already, a few dozen cars were parked on the lane, most of them squeezed as close to the woods as possible, some almost entirely swallowed by the underbrush.

Maggie spotted Matt's car right away-the old used Jeep he'd inherited from an uncle, its rear bumper plastered with half-shredded stickers he'd tried desperately to key off, as though he had backed up into a massive spider web. She remembered

the first time they'd ever driven around together, to celebrate the fact that he had finally gotten his license after failing the test three times. He'd stopped and started so abruptly she'd felt like she might puke up the doughnuts he'd bought her, but he was so happy, she was happy too.

All day, all week, she'd been both desperately hoping to see him and praying that she would never see him again.

If Delaney was here, she really would puke. She shouldn't have had the Slurpee.

'You okay?' Joh Joh asked her in a low voice as they got out of the car. He could always read her: she loved and hated that about him at the same time.

'I'm fine,' she said, too sharply.

'Why'd you do it, Maggie?' he said, putting a hand on her elbow and stopping her. 'Why'd you do it?' Maggie noticed he was wearing the same outfit he'd been wearing the last time she'd

seen him, on the beach- the faded-blue Lucky Charms T-shirt, the jeans so long they looped underneath the heels of his Converse-and felt vaguely annoyed by it. His dirty-blond hair was sticking out at crazy angles underneath his ancient Pittsburgh- hat. He smelled good, though, a very Joh Joh smell: like the inside of a drawer full of old coins and Tic Tacs.

For a second, she thought of telling him the truth: that when Matt had dumped her, she had understood

for the first time that she was a complete and total nobody.

But then he ruined it. ‘Please tell me this isn’t about Matthew Haiplley,’ he said.

There it was. The eye- roll.

‘Come on, Joh Joh.’ She could have hit him. Even hearing the name made her throat squeeze up into a knot.

‘Give me a reason, then. You said yourself, a million times, that Panic is stupid.’ ‘Nat entered, didn’t she? How come you aren’t lecturing her?’

‘Nat’s an idiot,’ Joh Joh said. He took off his hat and rubbed his head, and his hair responded as though it had been electrified, and it promptly stood straight up. Joh Joh claimed that his superpower was electromagnetic hair; Maggie’s only superpower seemed to be the amazing ability to have one angry red pimple at any given time.

‘She’s one of your best friends,’ Maggie pointed out.

‘So? She’s still an idiot. I have an open-door idiot policy on friendship.’

Maggie couldn’t help it; she laughed. Joh Joh smiled too, so wide she could see the small overlap in his two front teeth.

Joh Joh shoved on his baseball hat again, smothering the disaster of his hair. He was one of the few boys she knew who was taller than she was even Matt had been exactly her height, five-eleven. Sometimes she was grateful; sometimes she resented him for it like he was trying to prove a point by being taller.

Up until the time they were twelve years old, they'd been the same height, to the centimeter. In Joh Joh's bedroom was a ladder of old pencil marks on the wall to prove it.

'I'm betting on you, Nill,' he said in a low voice. 'I want you to know that. I don't want you to play. I think it's idiotic. But I'm betting on you.' He put an arm over her shoulder and squeezed her, and something in his tone of voice reminded her that once- ages and ages ago, it felt like she had

been briefly head-over-heels in love with him.

Freshman year, they'd had one fumbling kiss in the back of the Hudson Movie- Plex, even though she'd had popcorn stuck in her teeth, and for two days they'd held hands loosely, suddenly incapable of the conversation even though they'd been friends since elementary school. And then he had broken it off, and Maggie had said she understood, even though she didn't. She didn't know what made her think of it.

She couldn’t imagine being in love with Joh Joh now. He was like a brother-an an annoying brother who always felt the need to point out when you had a pimple. Which you did, always. But just one. Already, she could hear faint music through the trees, and the crackle and boom of Digging’s voice, amplified by the megaphone.

The water towers scrawled with graffiti and imprinted faintly with the words Allegheny- counties, where lit starkly from below. Perched on rail-thin legs, they looked like overgrown

insects. No like a single insect, with two rounded steel joints. Because Maggie could see, even from a distance, that a narrow wooden plank had been set between them, fifty feet in the air.

The challenge, this time, was clear.

By the time, Maggie, Nat, and Joh Joh had arrived at the place where the crowd was assembled, directly under the towers, her face was slick. As usual, the atmosphere was celebratory- the crowd was keyed up, antsy,

although everyone was speaking in whispers.

Someone had managed to maneuver a truck through the woods. A floodlight, hooked up to its engine, illuminated the towers and the single wooden plank running between them and lit up the mist of rain. Cigarettes flared intermittently, and the truck radio was playing old rock songs thudded quietly under the rhythm of conversation. They had to be quieter tonight; they weren’t far from the road.

‘Promise not to ditch me, okay?’

Nat said. Maggie was glad she’d said it; even though these were her classmates, people she’d known forever, Maggie had a sudden terror of getting lost in the crowd.

‘No way,’ Maggie said. She tried to avoid looking up, and she found herself unconsciously scanning the crowd for Matt. She could make out a group of sophomores huddled nearby, giggling, and Shayna Lambert, who was wrapped in a blanket and had a

thermos of something hot, as though she was at a football game.

Maggie was surprised to see Vivian Travin, standing by herself, a little ways' apart from the rest of the crowd. Her hair was knotted into dreadlocks, and in the moonlight, her various piercings glinted dully. Maggie had never seen Viv at a single social event-she'd never seen her doing much of anything besides cutting classes and waiting tables at Dot's. For some reason, the fact that even Viv had shown made her even more anxious.

‘Joh Joh!’ Avery Wallace pushed her way through the crowd and promptly catapulted herself into Joh Joh’s arms, as though he’d just rescued her from a major catastrophe. Maggie looked away as Joh Joh leaned down to kiss her. Avery was only five feet- one and standing next to her made Maggie feel like the Jolly Green Giant on a can of corn.

‘I missed you,’ Avery said when Joh Joh pulled away. She still hadn’t even acknowledged Maggie; she’d once overheard Maggie call her ‘shrimp

faced' and had never forgiven her. Avery did, however, look somewhat shrimplike, all tight and pink, so Maggie didn't feel that bad about it. Joh Joh mumbled something in return. Maggie felt nauseous, and heartbroken all over again. No one should be allowed to be happy when you were so miserable-especially not your best friends. It should be a law.

Avery giggled and squeezed Joh Joh's hand. 'Let me get my beer, okay? I'll be back. Stay right here.' Then she turned and vanished.

Immediately, Joh Joh raised his eyebrows at Maggie. ‘Don’t say it.’

‘What?’ Maggie held up both hands. Joh Joh stuck a finger in her face. ‘I know what you’re thinking,’ he said, and then jabbed at Nat.

‘You too.’

Nat did her best innocent face.

‘Unfair, Marks. I was just thinking about what a lovely accessory she makes. So-o small and convenient.’

‘The perfect pocket liner,’ Maggie agreed.

‘All right, all right.’ Joh Joh was doing a pretty good job of pretending to be angry.

‘Enough.’

‘It’s a compliment,’ Nat protested.

‘I said, enough.’ But after a minute, Joh Joh leaned over and whispered, ‘I can’t keep her in my pocket, you know. She bites.’ His lips bumped against Maggie’s ear-by accident, she was, sure- and she laughed. The weight of nerves in her stomach eased up a little. But then

someone cut the music, and the crowd got still and very quiet, and she knew it was about to begin. Just like that, she felt a numbing cold all over, as though all of the rain had solidified and frozen on her skin.

Part: 14

Disremembered

Maggie forgot about looking for Joh Joh. She watched, transfixed, as Zavic moved out onto the plank. From the safety of the ground, it looked almost beautiful: the soft haze of rain, Zavic’s arms extended, a dark black

shape against the clouds. Ray hadn't come down the ladder. He must have been watching too, although he had moved behind the water tank, so he was invisible.

It happened in a split second; Zavic jerked to one side, lost his footing, and was falling. Maggie heard herself cry out. She felt her heart rocket into the roof of her mouth, and in that second, as his arms pin-wheeled wildly and his mouth contorted in a scream, she thought, Nothing and none of us will ever be the same.

And then, just as quickly, he caught himself. He got his left foot back onto the board, and his body stopped swaying wildly from right to left, like a loose pendulum. He straightened up.

Someone screamed Zavic's name. And then the applause began, turning thunderous as he made his way, haltingly, the remaining few feet. No one heard the time that- Digging shouted. No one paid any attention to Ray as he came down the ladder. But as soon as Zavic was on the ground, he flew at Ray. Zavic was smaller than Ray

and skinnier, but he tackled him from behind and the move was unexpected. Ray was on the ground, face in the dirt, in a second.

'You are a freaking asshole. You threw something at me.' Zavic raised his fist; Ray twisted, bucking Zavic off him.

'What are you talking about?'

Ray, staggered to his feet, so his face was lit in the glare of the spotlight. He must have cut his lip on a rock. He was bleeding. He looked mean and ugly. Zavic got up too. His eyes

were wild -black and full of hatred. The crowd was still, frozen, and Maggie once again thought she could hear the rain, the dissolution of a hundred thousand different drops at once. Everything hung in the air, ready to fall.

'Don't lie,' Zavic spat out. 'You hit me in the chest. You wanted me to fall.'

'You're crazy.'

Ray started to turn away. Zavic charged him. And then they were down again, and all at once, the crowd

surged forward, everyone shouting, some pushing for a better view, some jumping in to pull the boys off each other.

Maggie was squeezed from all sides. She felt a hand on her back and she barely stopped herself from falling.

She reached for Nat's hand instinctively.

'Maggie!' Nat's face was white, frightened. Their hands were wrenched apart, and Nat went down among the blur of bodies.

‘Nat!’ Maggie shoved through the crowd, using her elbows, thankful now to be so big. Nat was trying to get up, and when Maggie reached her, she let out a scream of pain.

‘My ankle!’ Nat was saying, panicked, grabbing her leg. ‘Someone stepped on my ankle.’ Maggie reached for her, then felt a hand on her back: this time deliberate, forceful. She tried to twist around to see who had pushed her, but she was on the ground, face in the mud before she could. Feet churned up the dirt, splattered her face with

moisture. For just one moment, Maggie wondered whether this-the seething crowd, the surge was part of the challenge. She felt a break in the crowd, a fractional release.

'Come on.' She managed to stand up and hook Nat under the arm.

'It hurts,' Nat said, blinking back tears. But Maggie got her to her feet. Then a voice came blaring, suddenly, through the woods, huge and distorted.

'Freeze where you are, all of you…'

Cops…

Part: 15

Beams of Light

Everything was chaos. Beams of light swept across the crowd, turning faces white, frozen; people were running, pushing to get out, disappearing into the woods. Maggie counted four cops-one of them had wrestled someone to the ground, she couldn’t see who. Her mouth was dry, chalky, and her thoughts disjointed. Her hoodie was smeared with mud, and the cold seeped into her chest.

Joh- John was gone. Joh Joh had the car.

Car. They needed to get out or hide.

She kept a hand on Nat's arm and tried to pull her forward, but Nat stumbled. Tears welled up in her eyes.

'I can't,' she said.

'You have to.' Maggie felts desperate. Where was the hell, Joh Joh? She bent down to loop an arm around

Nat's waist. 'Lean on me.' 'I can't,' Nat repeated. 'It hurts too bad.'

Then Marcel Mason came out of nowhere. He was suddenly next to them, and without pausing or asking permission, he put one of his arms around Nat's waist as well, so that she could be carried between them. Nat gave a short cry of surprise, but she didn't resist. Maggie felt like she could kiss him.

'Come on,' he said. They passed into the woods, stumbling, going as quickly as possible, moving away from the booming megaphone-voices, the screaming, and the lights. It

was dark. Marcel kept his cell phone out; it cast a weak blue light on the sodden leaves underneath them, the wet ferns, and the shaggy, moss-covered trees.

'Where are, we are going?' Maggie whispered. Her heart was pounding. Nat could barely put any weight on her left leg, so every other step, she leaned heavily into Maggie.

'We have to wait until the cops clear out,' Marcel replied. He was short of breath. A few hundred feet beyond

the water towers, nestled in the trees, was a narrow pump house.

Maggie could hear mechanical equipment going inside it, humming through the walls, when they stopped so Marcel could shoulder the door open. It wasn’t locked.

Inside, it smelled like mildew and metal. The single room was dominated by two large tanks and various pieces of rusted electrical equipment; the air was filled with a constant, mechanical thrush, like the noise of a thousand crickets.

They could no longer hear shouting from the woods.

Part: 16

Twisted

‘Probably sprained,’ Marcel said.

‘Jez-us.’ Nat exhaled heavily and maneuvered onto the ground, extending her left leg in front of her, wincing. ‘It hurts.’

He sat down as well, but not too close.

‘I swear I felt someone crack it.’ Nat leaned forward and began touching the skin around her ankle. She inhaled sharply.

‘Leave it, Nat,’ Maggie said. ‘We’ll get some ice on it as soon as we can.’ She was cold and suddenly exhausted. The rush she’d felt from completing the challenge was gone.

She was wet and hungry, and the last thing she wanted to do was sit in a stupid pump house for half the night. She pulled out her phone and texted Joh Joh. Where are you?

‘How’d you know about this place?’ Nat asked Marcel. ‘Found it the other day,’ Marcel said. ‘I was scouting. Mind if I smoke?’

‘Kind of,’ Maggie said.

He shrugged and replaced the cigarettes in his jacket. He kept his cell phone out, on the floor, so his silhouette was touched with blue.

‘Thank you,’ Nat blurted out. ‘For helping me. That was really… I mean, you didn’t have to.’

‘No problem,’ Marcel said.

Maggie couldn’t see his face, but there was a weird quality to his voice like he was being choked.

‘I mean; we’ve never even spoken before….’ Maybe realizing she sounded rude, Nat trailed off.

For a minute, there was silence.

Maggie sent another text to Joh Joh.

What The F*ck?

Then Marcel said abruptly, ‘We spoke before. Once. At the pep rally, last year. You called me David.’

‘I did?’ Nat giggled nervously.

‘Stupid. I was probably drunk. Remember, Maggie? We took those disgusting shots.’

‘Mmmm.’ Maggie was still standing. She leaned up against the door, listening to the sound of the rain, which was drumming a little harder now. She strained to hear, underneath it, the continued sounds of shouting.

She couldn’t believe Joh Joh still hadn’t texted her back. Joh Joh always responded to her messages right away.

‘Anyway, I’m an idiot,’ Nat was saying. ‘Anyone will tell you that. But I couldn’t very well forget a name like Marcel, could I? I wish I had a cool name.’

‘I like your name,’ Marcel said quietly.

Maggie felt a sharp pain go through her. She had heard in Marcel’s voice a familiar longing, a hollowness- and she knew then, immediately and

without doubt, that Marcel liked Natalie. For a second, she had a blind moment of envy, a feeling that gripped her from all sides. Of course. Of course, Marcel liked Nat. She was pretty and giggly and small and cute, like an animal you'd find in someone's purse.

-Like-

Avery. The association arrived unexpectedly, and she dismissed it quickly. She didn't care about Avery, and she didn't care whether Marcel liked Nat, either. It wasn't her business. Still, the idea continued to

drum through her, like the constant patter of the rain: that no one would ever love her.

‘How long do you think we should wait?’ Nat asked.

‘Not too much longer,’ Marcel said. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Maggie knew she should make a conversation, but she was too tired.

‘I wish it wasn’t so dark,’ Nat said after a few minutes, rustling. Maggie could tell from her voice she was getting impatient.

Marcel stood up. ‘Wait here,’ he said and slipped outside. For a while, there was silence except for a tinny banging-something moving through the pipes and the hiss of water on the roof.

‘I’m going to go to L.A.,’ Nat blurted out suddenly. ‘If I win.’ Maggie turned to her. Nat looked defiant, as though she expected Maggie to start making fun of her. ‘What for…?’ Maggie asked.

‘The surfers,’ Nat said. Then she rolled her eyes. ‘Hollywood, bean

brain. What do you think about it?’ Maggie went over to her and crouched. Nat always said she wanted to be an actress, but Maggie had never thought she was serious-not serious enough to do it, definitely not serious enough to play Panic for it. But Maggie just nudged her with a shoulder.

‘Promise me that when you’re rich and famous, you won’t forget the bean brains you knew back when.’

‘I promise,’ Nat said. The air smelled faintly like charcoal.

‘What about you? What will you do if you win?’ Maggie shook her head. She wanted to say: Run until I burst. Build miles and miles and miles between me and Carp. Leave the old Maggie behind, burn her to dust. Instead, she shrugged. ‘Go somewhere, I guess.

Sixty-seven grand buys a lot of gas.’

Nat shook her head. ‘Come on, Maggie,’ she said quietly. ‘Why’d you enter?’

Just like that, Maggie thought of Matt, and the hopelessness of everything, and felt like she would cry. She swallowed back the feeling. ‘Did you know?’ she said finally.

‘About Matt, I mean, and Delaney.’

‘I heard a rumor,’ Nat said carefully.

‘But I didn’t believe it.’

‘I heard she … with him…’

Maggie couldn’t say the words. She knew she was probably a little

prude, especially compared to Nat. She was embarrassed about it and proud of it at the same time: she just didn't see what was so great about fooling around. 'At the frigging

Arboretum.' 'She's a whore,' Nat said matter of- factly. 'Bet she gives him herpes. Or worse.'

'Worse than herpes?' Maggie said doubtfully.

'Syphilis… Turns you into a mutter.

Puts holes in the brain, swiss-cheese- style.' Maggie sometimes forgot that Nat could always make her laugh. 'I hope not,' she said. She managed to smile. 'He wasn't that smart, to begin with. I don't think he has a lot of brains to spare.'

'You hope so, you mean.' Nat mimed holding up a glass.

'To Delaney's syphilis.'

'You're crazy,' Maggie said, but she was laughing full-on now.

Nat ignored her. ‘Marry it turn Joel Flores’s brain to delicious, gooey cheese.’

‘Amen,’ Maggie said and raised her arm.

‘Amen.’ They pretended to clink. Maggie stood up again and moved to the door. Marcel was still not back; she wondered what he was doing.

‘Do you think-’ Maggie took a deep breath. ‘Do you think anyone will ever love me?’ ‘I love you,’ Nat said. ‘Joh Joh loves you. Your mom loves

you.’ Maggie made a face, and Nat said, ‘She does, Heath bar, in her way.

-And-

Lily loves you too.’

‘You guys don’t count,’ Maggie said.

Then, realizing how that sounded, she giggled. ‘No offense.’

‘None took,’ Nat said. After a pause, Maggie said, ‘I love you, too, you know. I’d be a basket case without you. I mean it. I’d be carted off and, I don’t

know, drawing aliens in my mashed potatoes by now.'

'I know,' Nat said. Maggie felt as if all the years of their lives together, their friendship, were welling up there, in the dark: the time they'd practiced kissing on Nat's mom's sofa cushions; the first time they'd ever smoked a cigarette and Maggie had puked; all the secret texts in classes, fingers moving under the desk and behind their textbooks. All of it was hers, hers and Nat's, and all those years were nestled inside them like one of those Russian

dolls, holding dozens of tiny selves inside it.

Maggie turned to Nat, suddenly breathless.

‘Let’s split the money,’ she blurted out.

‘What?’

Nat blinked…

‘If one of us wins, let’s split it.’ Maggie realized, as soon as she said it, that she was right. ‘Fifty-fifty. Thirty grants can still buy a lot of gas, you know.’

For a second, Nat just stared at her.

Then she said, ‘All right. Fifty-fifty.’ Nat laughed. ‘Should we shake on it? Or pinkie swear?’

‘I trust you,’ Maggie said.

Marcel returned at last. ‘It’s clear,’ he said.

Maggie and Marcel supported Nat between them, and together they made their way beneath the water towers and into the clearing that had so recently been packed with characters.

Now the only evidence of the crowd was the trash left behind: stamped-out cigarette butts and all the joints, crushed beer cans, towels, a few umbrellas. The truck was still parked in the mud, but its engine was stopped.

Maggie imagined the cops would bring out a tow for it later. The quiet was strange, and the whole scene felt weirdly creepy. It made Maggie think that everyone had been spirited away into thin air.

Marcel gave a sudden shout. ‘Hold on a second,’ he said and left Nat

leaning on Maggie. He moved several feet away and scooped something up from the ground-a transportable cooler. Maggie saw, when he angled his cell phone light onto it, that it still contained ice and beer. However, Joh Joh's phone was still going straight to voicemail and was getting cut off on the second ring. Matt and Delaney were probably intimate sung and warm wooden plank, and the itch in the soles of her feet, telling her to jump.

'Jackpot,' Marcel said. He smiled for the first time all night. He

took the cooler with them, and when they reached Route 22, he made a substitute ice pack for Nat's ankle.

There were three beers left, one for each of them at that time, and they drank so much collectively on the side of the road, in the pouring rain, while they waited for the bus to appear. Nat got giggly after just a few sips, and she and Marcel joked about smoking a cigarette to make the bus come quicker, and Maggie knew she should be satisfied.

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